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ABSTRACT

The idea that U.S. schools have a distinctively civic mission has been recognized since the earliest days of the republic. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, and others believed that the civic mission of schools was to foster the qualities of mind and heart required for successful government within a constitutional democracy. People still believe that education for responsible citizenship should be the schools' top priority. It is worth noting that over the course of 32 years of Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polling the public has not wavered in that conviction. This paper contends, however, that civic education is grossly neglected and provides abundant evidence highlighting several studies to make its case. The paper discusses the preliminary report in 2001 of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year. It concludes that it is imperative that all people receive the kind of civic education that enables them to fulfill their everyday responsibilities of citizenship: taking part in the discussion of public matters; participating in organizations that make up civil society; monitoring government officials and institutions; serving on juries; voting; and seeking or holding public office. (BT)

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Making the Case for Civic Education: Educating Young People for Responsible Citizenship

Margaret Stimmann Branson
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Presented to the Conference for Professional Development for Program Trainers
Manhattan Beach, California, February 25, 2001

It may have been some time since you have read or re-read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. You will remember, however, that it was Doyle who created the most famous detective of fiction, Sherlock Holmes. Holmes had such brilliant analytical faculties and such indefatigable interest in any seemingly insolvable problem that he regularly put Scotland Yard to shame. And that is why Holmes and his devoted and admiring friend, Dr. Watson, were summoned to the "West Country"—Devon, Dartmoor, and Exeter—to investigate the mysterious disappearance of a racehorse named Silver Blaze. Their preliminary investigation left Dr. Watson stumped, as he usually was, so he asked Holmes

"Is there any other point to which you would draw my attention." To which Holmes responded: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time." Still perplexed Watson protested "But the dog did nothing in the night-time." "Ah!" replied the ever-perspicacious Holmes, "That was the curious incident." He then went on to explain to the still-baffled Watson that because the "dog did nothing"—not even bark—it meant that whoever gained access to the stables was a person the dog recognized and was not threatened by.

That shrewd observation on Holmes' part enabled him to narrow the list of suspects, bring the culprit to justice, and return Silver Blaze to his rightful owners.

Now you may be wondering why we are talking about the case of the dog that "did nothing" when we are met to consider the serious and consequential matter of civic education. But like Sherlock Holmes, I would submit that the absence of adequate civic education in our schools is indeed "a curious incident." It is "curious" because the idea that American schools have a distinctively civic mission has been recognized since the earliest days of the Republic. Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and others realized that the establishment of well-constructed

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political institutions was not in itself a sufficiently strong foundation to maintain constitutional democracy. They knew that ultimately a free society must depend on its citizens—on their knowledge, skills, and civic virtue. They believed that the civic mission of the schools is to foster the qualities of mind and heart required for successful government within a constitutional democracy.

Americans still believe that schools have a civic mission and that education for responsible citizenship should be the schools' top priority. The 32nd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll conducted in the year 2000 asked respondents what they considered to be the most important purpose of the nation's schools. They ranked "preparing people to become responsible citizens" as number one. Other purposes such as "helping people become economically self sufficient," "promoting cultural unity," and "improving social conditions" were mentioned but were considered to be of lesser importance.[1]

It is worth noting that over the course of 32 years of Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polling the public has not wavered in its conviction that the schools' central mission is educating young people for citizenship. It is also worth noting that the public's conviction obtains whether or not respondents have children in school or whether or not their children are in public or private school.

How "curious"—as Sherlock Holmes would say—it then is that schools today seem fixated on teaching reading and mathematics—with an occasional nod to science. If Americans are agreed, as they in fact are, that the primary purpose of schools is to "educate people for responsible citizenship" then one would expect to see civic education given a prominent place in the curriculum and in the life of the student body. Unhappily that is not the case. The evidence is abundant. Civic education is grossly neglected, as we know from a plethora of recent studies. Let me share with you highlights from just a few of those studies.

- The 1998 "Civics Report for the Nation" (or the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics) found more than 30 percent of all students tested at grades 4, 8, and 12 scored <u>below</u> a "Basic" level of understanding of civics and government. Another 39 to 48 percent scored at the "Basic" level, defined as a "<u>partial</u> mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental to proficient work at a given grade." The National Assessment Governing Board, however, has said "All students should reach the Proficient level; the Basic level is not a desired

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goal...." Even so, only 21-22 percent scored at Proficient level—the achievement level that the Governing Board said all students should reach. A mere 2-4 percent achieved the "Advanced" level signifying superior performance.[2]

- A study completed by the National Secretaries of State in 1999 was based on a representative survey of 18-24 year-olds. It found that young people "lack any real understanding of citizenship..., information and understanding about the democratic process..., and information about candidates and political parties." Furthermore, the Secretaries of State report noted that most young people do not seek out political information and that they are not very likely to do so in the future."[3]

- The National Commission on Civic Renewal tells us that two other measures of democracy—political and interpersonal trust—have declined sharply. In the early 1960's, more than three-quarters of Americans said that the federal government could usually or just about always "be trusted to do the right thing." In the 1990's that figure was closer to one-quarter.[4]

- A National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Trend Report released late last year (2000) found a trend toward less frequent social studies classes in grade four. In 1988 less than half (49%) of students nationwide reported daily classes in social studies. Ten years later in 1998 daily classes in social studies for fourth graders had dropped to just 39 percent.[5]

- The Council of Chief State School Officers Survey of State Student Assessment Programs for the year 2000 found that "Almost all states regularly assess mathematics and language arts/reading (47 and 46 states respectively) while about two-thirds assess writing and science. Not quite half of the states assess social studies.[6]

Much as we may lament an emphases on testing as opposed to an emphasis on learning, the truth is that what is tested is deemed to be the most essential subject matter. Today schools are ranked according to their pupils' achievement in reading, mathematics, writing, and science. Parents, the public, and policymakers make judgments about the needs and worth of teachers and schools based on those test scores. How "curious" it is that parents, the public, and policymakers are not equally, if not more, attentive to what they repeatedly

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proclaim to be the primary purpose of schools—educating informed, effective, and responsible citizens.

The results of the studies just cited are disturbing. They were responsible, in part, for the creation of yet another commission—the National Commission on the High School Senior Year. Its preliminary report issued in January 2001 sounds this ominous warning:

"If we go along as we have been, about half our people, perhaps two-thirds, will flourish. Well educated, comfortable with ambiguity, and possessed of the confidence that accompanies self-knowledge, they will be well-suited to participate in an increasingly global and multicultural world and to exercise the responsibilities of citizenship. The other one-third to one-half of our people are more likely to flounder. Poorly educated, worried about their place in a rapidly changing world, they may look on the complexities of an interdependent world as threatening and the demands of citizenship as a burden."[7]

To preclude that warning from becoming reality, the Commission urges changes that have particular meaning for civic education. Looking to the future, the Commission says:

"All will need a sense of history (both of the United States and the world) an understanding of government and democratic values and an appreciation for how the arts and literature explain the human condition and expand its possibilities. And, because they will be asked to decide complicated public questions (often with incomplete and conflicting information) all will need to be thoughtful observers of current events and be at ease with ambiguity."[8]

Let's take a closer look at the Commission's assessment of what needs to be done.

Let's look first at its claim that ALL need a sense of history and an understanding of government and democratic values, because ALL will be asked to decide complicated public questions.

What does having a "sense of history" mean and why do ALL need it? Having a sense of history means much more than knowing the answers to multiple choice questions or having a nodding acquaintance with an assortment of names, dates, and events. A sense of history means grappling with the great questions that have engaged human beings and societies over time. It means appreciating the significant

achievements and learning from the experience of those who have preceded us. A sense of history means that we are able to transcend the here and now—the time, place, and culture constraints of our own existence—and to empathize with those whose life circumstances were and are different from ours. Further, a sense of history enables us to view our own lives and time from a broader perspective, so that we can make better judgments about what is truly significant and what is insignificant.

In addition to cultivating a broad sense of history, it is particularly important that all Americans have a sense of their constitutional history. They should understand how and why our country came into being, why the writing of our Constitution was a landmark event in the history of the world, how and why our Constitution has served as an impetus for social and political movements both at home and abroad, and how and why that Constitution has enabled us to govern ourselves successfully for more than two centuries.

Let's turn now to the second part of the Commission's injunction—that ALL "need an understanding of government and democratic values." What is an "understanding of government?" Certainly understanding government means more than just being familiar with the structure or the "anatomy" of a particular government. Understanding government means recognizing that government, no matter how it is organized, is the most powerful instrument for social control ever devised. Understanding government entails an appreciation of its impact on our own lives. It is government that can declare war or make peace, can foster justice or injustice, can enact fair or unfair laws, and can protect or violate human rights. Citizens, therefore, need the knowledge, the skills and the will to monitor government and to influence its actions so that those actions accord with democratic values and comport with democratic processes.

Understanding government also means entertaining probing questions about it—questions of the kind found in the *National Standards for Civics and Government*.[9] Here are some examples:

- What is government and what purposes should it serve?
- What are the essential characteristics of limited and unlimited government?
- What are the nature and purposes of constitutions?

- What is the place of law in the American constitutional system?

- Why do conflicts among fundamental values such as liberty and equality or individual rights and the common good arise and how might those conflicts be resolved?
- What are the rights of citizens and how should the scope and limits of those rights be determined?

- What are the personal and the civic responsibilities of citizens in American constitutional democracy and when and why might tensions arise between them?

When people ask and seek answers for themselves to those kinds of questions they come closer to understanding government, as opposed to just knowing about government. That understanding provides them with functional knowledge; it empowers them because their efficacy is enhanced. Further, learning how to ask probing and significant questions can become a life-long habit which serves citizens well when they make judgments about public issues and proposed policies or when they want to hold officials or institutions accountable.

As important as an understanding of government is, a penetrating grasp of democratic values and a freely-given, self-conscious commitment to them is still more important. Comprehension of and commitment to democratic values is of particular consequence for all who live in the United States. That is true because, in contrast to most other nations, the identity of Americans is defined by shared political values, principles, and beliefs rather than by ethnicity, race, religion, class, language, gender, or national origin. Acceptance of and allegiance to democratic values are what make us a people, what bind us one to another. The values we share and the principles to which we adhere promote cohesion in our daily lives, and in times of crisis they have enabled us to find common ground. The values, principles, and beliefs we share as Americans not only have provided a foundation for the stability of our government, they have spurred efforts by individuals and groups which have brought us closer to realizing our goal of liberty and justice for all.

Throughout this discussion we have alluded to the need for civic education for ALL—for everyone. The need for the inclusiveness of civic education cannot be emphasized too strongly because of the power which we the people have. Our founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, proclaim the natural rights concept that ultimate political authority rests with the people who have

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the power to create, alter, or abolish government. As wielders of such awesome power, it is imperative that the people—all the people—be educated to exercise their power judiciously. It also is imperative that all the people receive the kind of civic education that enables them to fulfill their everyday responsibilities of citizenship:

- taking part in the discussion of public matters
- participating in organizations that make up civil society
- monitoring government officials and institutions
- serving on juries
- voting, and
- seeking or holding public office.

In a letter to a friend Thomas Jefferson once wrote:

"Enlighten the people generally and tyranny and the oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil sprits at the dawn of day."
Letter to Du Pont de Nemours, 24 April 1816

Jefferson was using poetic license and he undoubtedly overstated the case. But we do know that in a democracy "the people generally" must be enlightened. We also know that if constitutional government is not only to survive but to thrive, then every citizen must have the kind of education which will make him an informed, effective, and responsible citizen.

For more than 200 years—from the time of our country's founding to the present day—we have asserted that the primary purpose of our schools is to educate young people for responsible citizenship. Is it not "curious" then that we have not acted with more dispatch to accomplish our proclaimed goal? At what cost to the health of our constitutional government is this continued neglect of good civic education for all? Is it not imperative that educational leaders such as you who are in this audience take the initiative in seeing that our schools better attend their most fundamental purpose—educating young people for responsible citizenship?

Footnotes

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